

Douglass's Biography

*Frederick Douglass (c.1818-1895) was born as a slave in Talbot County, Maryland. He escaped slavery in 1838 and went to New England to work and gain more education. There he was taken under the wing of an influential abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison and then began writing for newspaper and speaking to the abolitionist cause. In 1845 he went to England where his friends raised enough money to buy his freedom from his Maryland owner. He published *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, and American Slave, Written by Himself*, the same year, upon his return to the United States. In 1847 he started *The North Star*, an antislavery paper that rose to circulation of about 3,000 (an impressive number at the time) and was read in the United States and abroad (Emery and Emery 129). The masthead of the paper proclaimed, “The Right is of no Sex—Truth is of no Color—God is the Father of us all, and we are all Brethren” (qtd. in Emery and Emery 129). He had a long career as a public servant and diplomat; one of his public positions was U.S. minister and consul general to the Republic of Haiti from 1889 to 1891 (Douglass and Jacobs v). An early civil rights figure, he was the most renowned African American in the Republican Party during and after Reconstruction. He died at the age of 78 in 1895.*

- This brief biography can inform students’ reading of *The Narrative* as it is a fully autobiographical work of literature. Furthermore, seeing these facts in one place might introduce the idea of self-improvement through knowledge and education—a concept that was very important for Douglass and should be important for our students too.
 - The *Narrative* is a fully autobiographical work of literature.
 - Douglass valued and promoted the idea of self-improvement through knowledge and education.
- Milton Polsky writes, “Slave narratives are biographical and autobiographical tales of bondage and freedom either written or told by former slaves” (166). Most narratives were written as propaganda and their purpose was to eventually lead to complete abolition of slavery as an institution (Polsky). In addition to folk songs, slave narratives are considered to be the most important early contribution of African Americans to American literature.
- Slave narratives are a good educational choice because of several reasons. First, they offer a unique perspective of American slavery as told from the viewpoint of the victim. They afford our students an opportunity to make connections between the past and their lives. Polsky supports this contention when he says, “[t]he educational content found in the genre affords many insights into the workings of slavery in this country – common ordeals, living conditions, workloads and punishments, feelings of fear and expectation of freedom” (167). A major theme of most narratives, including Douglass’s, is the slave’s heroic resistance to a “system of brutalizing dehumanization” (Polsky 167). This theme can improve the sense of pride in black students, and also help white students understand the contributions of black men and women to our country.
- It should also be beneficial to tell the students that Douglass’s main purpose in writing his narrative was to inform the audience about slavery and then persuade them that it should be abolished. Then students’ energy and efforts can be directed towards finding out devices and tools Douglass used to achieve this purpose. The narrative is an insightful first-hand account and primary source to comprehend the abomination of an institution such as slavery in the United States
- Douglass persuades his audience to reject and abolish slavery mostly through development of two themes in his narrative. The first is the theme of inequality. The second important theme that helps Douglass achieve his purpose is the theme of hypocrisy of some Christians. Douglass exposes the hypocrisy of Christian slave owners who treat their slaves in cruel and inhumane ways, but he also exposes hypocrisy of Christian religion at large as it openly supported slavery.
- In addition to using themes to convey his message, Douglass uses symbolism for the same purpose. The Prestwick House edition lists the following as some of the symbols that stand out in the narrative: the white-sailed ships of the Chesapeake Bay as symbols of freedom and spirituality; cities (both New York and Baltimore) as contrasts to rural life and to showcase the difference in treatment of the slaves; and *The Columbian Orator* as a symbol of the power of the written and spoken word to change and influence human rights (Douglass 7).
- The power of the *Narrative* lies not only in its being a historical primary source, but also its being a successful account on how to defy fate and overcome adversity. Douglass defies fate and overcomes adversity by using learning and education as tools to break the shackles of his slavery. Perhaps it takes someone who was denied the right of freedom to help teach today’s generations who seem to take this right for granted.
- Finally, teaching Douglass’s narrative should address the connection between literature and social issues. After gaining his freedom Douglass considered himself an advocate for everybody’s rights, especially for the rights of

slaves. Furthermore students should be encouraged to see the mutual relationship between any art, especially literature, and social issues. They should be asked the following questions: How did the slave narrative reflect social issues in the US in 1800s? How does some of the modern art, literature, music, poetry, etc., reflect our social issues?

- Through studying the plot of the narrative, students will understand this, and while the details of where he went and the names of his masters may escape them years after reading the *Narrative*, the fact that the historical moment in which Douglass lived shaped him into who he was should remain with them forever. . . . students should be able to retain the understanding of the other side of history/literature coin: namely that really good literature helps shape history.
- Douglass combines all three purposes of an author – he informs, he entertains, and persuades—but the heavy emphasis in the *Narrative* is on persuasion. Douglass is making a case against slavery and for the Abolitionist movement and equality of all people
- This understanding of Douglass’s main purpose should then help students internalize the concept that good literature can influence history. And, even though Douglass was only a part of a larger movement to abolish slavery, he was one of its most prominent members, and his narrative helped open many eyes to the cruelty and travesty of slavery. In this way the *Narrative* helped shape history. This kind of thinking follows a school of thought called New Historicism. Unlike “old historicism” which tended to “present the background information you needed to know before you could fully appreciate the separate world of art” (Murfin 268), New Historicism believed that “works of literature are simultaneously influenced by and influencing reality” and that “literature refers to and is referred to by things outside itself” (Murfin 266).
- Some of the people Douglass mentions in his narrative are as intriguing as he is: Anna Murray Douglass and David Ruggles, for instance.

Additional sources/subjects to consider:

- More about/by Frederick Douglass
 - National Park Service: Douglass’ home in DC (National Historic Site) <http://www.nps.gov/frdo/historyculture/people.htm>
 - The Frederick Douglass papers (Library of Congress) <http://www.loc.gov/collection/frederick-douglass-papers/about-this-collection/>
 - University of Rochester Frederick Douglass project <http://www.lib.rochester.edu/index.cfm?PAGE=2494>
 - *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855) (*Narrative* was published in 1845)
 - *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (1881, revised, 1892)
 - *The North Star* (abolitionist newspaper, founder and editor, 1847-1851)
 - Famous Speeches
 - “The Church and Prejudice”
 - “Self-Made Men”
 - “Speech at National Hall, Philadelphia, July 6, 1863 for the Promotion of Colored Enlistments”
 - “What to a Slave is the 4th of July?”
 - Speech for Women’s Suffrage at the Seneca Falls Convention, July 1848
- MAPPING SLAVERY (Library of Congress) <http://blogs.loc.gov/loc/2012/10/mapping-slavery/>
- “Frederick Douglass” by Robert Hayden (poem)
 - <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/175757>
 - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XeD9XYeIRol>
 - <https://robertpinsky.wordpress.com/2014/12/03/robert-hayden-frederick-douglass/>
 - <http://www.theatlantic.com/past/docs/issues/99oct/9910pinsky2.htm>
 - ‘Poetry Out Loud’ Winner Reads ‘Frederick Douglass’
<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=90078073>
- UNDERGROUND RAILROAD
 - National Park Service: National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom Program
<http://www.nps.gov/subjects/ugrr/education/index.htm>
- SLAVE MUSIC
 - What Does This Song Really Say?(Kennedy Center’s Elementary School Lesson Plan for African American spirituals and the Underground Railroad)
http://artsedge.kennedy-center.org/educators/lessons/grade-3-4/What_does_this_song_say.aspx

- Voices from the Days of Slavery (Library of Congress)
<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/collections/voices/vfstitle.html>
- OTHER SLAVE NARRATIVES
 - Born in Slavery (The Library of Congress): Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938
<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html>
 - The Enslaved and the Civil War: How did African Americans enslaved in the Confederacy undermine the Southern cause during the Civil War? (National Humanities Center) <http://americainclass.org/the-enslaved-and-the-civil-war/>
 - Runaway Journeys (The Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture)
<http://www.inmotionaame.org/migrations/landing.cfm?migration=2>
 - Voices from the Days of Slavery: Former Slaves Tell Their Stories (Audio recordings—includes a lot of music, Library of Congress) <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/collections/voices/>
 - Works of Civil War Era African American Women
<http://www.loc.gov/rr/program/bib/aacivilwarwomen/bibliography.html>
 - To My Old Master (a letter from freed man Jourdon Anderson to his former master, Colonel PH Anderson, in response to a job offer) <http://www.lettersofnote.com/2012/01/to-my-old-master.html>
 - SOLOMON NORTHRUP (*Twelve Years a Slave*)
 - *Twelve Years a Slave: Narrative of Solomon Northrup, a Citizen of New-York, Kidnapped in Washington City in 1841, and Rescued in 1853, From a Cotton Plantation Near the Red River, in Louisiana.* The full text, published by Derby & Miller in 1853 (full text available online--
<http://docsouth.unc.edu/fpn/northup/northup.html>)
 - The film (12 Years a Slave) note: this film is rated R and difficult to watch due to its graphic violence and cruelty. It is not exaggerated in any way beyond the historical primary source document, but *seeing* the facts of the story is brutal. Do not watch this movie on a whim, without real thought, consideration, and your parents' approval. You are not required to watch this for class.
 - Common Sense Media Parent Review: "Parents need to know that *12 Years a Slave* is a harrowing, moving drama based on a book written in the 1850s by Solomon Northrup recounting his experiences as a slave, and it can be difficult to watch. There are scenes that show extreme brutality (beatings, hangings) and rough language (the use of the "N" word), and extreme emotional cruelty. Expect some slave market nudity, plus the sexual assault of a slave by a master. Very young teens and tweens may find it too intense, but older teens should watch it to bear witness to a tragic part of American history." <https://www.commonsensemedia.org/movie-reviews/12-years-a-slave>
 - *New York Times* article (September 22, 2013) "An Escape from Slavery, Now a Movie, Has Long Intrigued Historians. <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/23/business/media/an-escape-from-slavery-now-a-movie-has-long-intrigued-historians.html>
- BOOKER T. WASHINGTON *Up from Slavery: An Autobiography* (Doubleday & Co, c. 1901) (full text available online <http://docsouth.unc.edu/fpn/washington/menu.html>)

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER AS YOU READ

What is the most compelling reason to read this narrative?

When you finish reading (and researching, if applicable), what do you want to know?

How might this book help to solve a "real-world" problem today?